

Casualties Spurred Disclosure

Adviser-Role Fiction Seems Ended by U.S. N. Viet Air Strikes

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The American air strikes on North Viet-Nam last week seemed to have also struck down the long-standing fiction that U.S. military men in South Viet-Nam are various types of noncombatants.

Following the lead and directives of top U.S. officials, American military spokesmen here and in Saigon always have been careful to speak of U.S. troops there as "advisers," "trainers" and "support personnel" to the South Vietnamese armed forces, and have insisted the Americans "only fire back when fired upon."

Actually their combatant role was considerably more than this, and there now appears to be a tacit recognition that there is little point in fudging about the fact.

A United Press International dispatch from Saigon yesterday reported:

"U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter gunners killed 88 Communist Viet Cong guerrillas in scattered incidents during the past 48 hours, an American military spokesman announced today.

"The announcement was a departure from long standing American policy of playing down U.S. military involvement in South-Viet Nam where American troops are technically referred to as 'advisers.'"

News Analysis

Several news dispatches last week referred to Col. Theodore Metaxis, former assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and now senior U.S. adviser to the Vietnamese Second Corps, as being in charge of the operations at Qui Nhon that repelled a Viet Cong amphibious attack on that port after the costly bombing of a U.S. barracks there.

About the same time, press reports told of Army Capt. Thomas B. Throckmorton, son of Lt. Gen. John L. Throckmorton, deputy U.S. commander in Viet-Nam, being wounded while leading a South Vietnamese airborne battalion in an attack on two Viet Cong battalions. He was U.S. adviser to the attacking South Vietnamese unit.

Actually there has been no change in the role of Americans in combat within

South Viet-Nam. There has been a change in U.S. policy so far as retaliating for Viet Cong raids in South Viet-Nam with bombing attacks on North Viet-Nam, but south of the 17th parallel American GIs are doing what they have been doing for a long time.

U.S. Army and Marine armed helicopters long have been giving close fire support to American transport choppers flying South Vietnamese troops in airborne operations against the Viet-Cong. They open up on ground targets without waiting to be shot at.

U.S. Air Force pilots assigned to training the Vietnamese air force have taken part in a large number of fixed-wing air attacks on the Viet Cong while taking their student fliers on "operational training missions" in two-seater A-1E Skyhawk propeller attack planes.

The American airmen have done well both in combat and as trainers, for the Vietnamese graduates of their flight school made two successful raids on North Viet-Nam last week in one-seater A-1H Skyhawks, with Americans accompanying them on jet escort and flak suppression missions.

Many another American Army officer than Col. Metaxis and Capt. Throckmorton have led or helped lead offensive or defensive operations against the Viet Cong. This has been well known though not officially stated.

It is true, of course, that strictly speaking the Americans are in Viet-Nam as advisers, trainers and support personnel to the Vietnamese armed forces, not as commanders in overall charge of battle operations or with ground combat units, as during the Korean War. There is no change in this, although last week's air raids finally brought official acknowledgement of the known presence of U.S. Air Force combat jet squadrons at Da Nang.

The U.S. Government has had a variety of reasons for playing down the now-abandoned fiction that its role in Viet-Nam was somehow non-combatant. One reason alone for dropping the pose is the mounting U.S. casualty figure: 283 killed by hostile action, 1752 wounded, 12 taken prisoner and 26 missing.